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YOM HASHOAH REMARKS
BETH AM ISRAEL
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By Joseph S. Finkelstein

I have been asked to share with you some of my family stories about survival during the Holocaust. The stories which I am going to relate are of two survivors, my parents, Sol Finkelstein and Goldie Cukier Finkelstein.

I want to preface these remarks by mentioning that while these events are very much part of my family history and my identity, I knew nothing of these matters while I was growing up. The Holocaust was never discussed, nor were probing questions ever asked. I knew the names of dead relatives, the towns where my parents grew up, a little about life before the war, and the names Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, where my father and mother, respectively, were prisoners.
I also knew my father had a tattoo on his arm. Mostly, I knew something very terrible had happened Over There, and it was so horrible that no one could talk about it. This wasn't a stated rule, we just knew that it was this way.

I first learned these stories in 1989, when I had been chosen by the State of Israel Bonds organization to be honored. I was to be given the "New Life/ New Leadership" award for being a successful and communally involved child of survivors. To my mind, it wasn't me who was really being honored but my parents, for their survival and rebuilding of Jewish life. The chairman of this event asked my parents to tell their stories, something I was unable to do, and at the age of 37 I found out for the first time a little bit of what Over There meant. So, these family stories go back about 60 years, but it was only after 50 years had passed that things could be told, and now I can speak about them as well.

I will relate just a few stories, first about my mother, and then my father, and I will conclude with reading to you a portion of the remarks my father made at this Israel Bonds event, when he spoke publically for the first time about what it meant to survive the Shoah.

My mother was ten years old when the Nazis entered her town of Sosnowiec, Poland, on the third day of the war. She was the second of four children of Joseph Cukier, for whom I am named, and Miriam Goldstein Cukier. First was Toby, three years older than my mother, then my mother, her younger brother Ateek, and her baby sister Gutcha. My mother was then in fifth grade. She lived a privileged life in a home with servants, cooks, and annual vacations in the country.

For a considerable period of time they were able to remain in their apartment. My grandfather was a wealthy merchant, in the wholesale dry goods business, and was able to bribe the Judenrat not to take his family in the early transports. In early 1943, my mother and her older sister Toby were walking together on the street and were captured in a raid, or Aktion, by the Germans. They were being taken to a camp as slave laborers. My grandfather gave bribes to the Judenrat, and it was arranged that his daughters would be

released; the Nazis did not care which Jews it took, so long as the quota was met. When they got to the gate of the camp where their father was waiting, the SS Captain who was in charge at the gate saw this and said, "What is this, two sisters? Only one may be released, you must choose." My mother stepped up and said she should stay in the camp, and Toby should be released and brought home by her father. Goldie was 13 and looked much younger, and my aunt Toby was 16 and a mature and beautiful woman, who would be at greater risk. My grandfather had to make this awful choice and he chose Toby.

My grandfather kept trying to get my mother out, but before he could my mother was sent to a labor camp called Graben, in Germany. When the girls arrived they were made to strip and 400 young girls stood naked in the winter weather while the Germans terrorized them and humiliated them. The Germans took all of their photographs of family members and made a bonfire. They were given back clothing, but not their own, the tall girl was giving a short girl's clothing, a small girl large clothing, and so on, and the Germans constantly inflicted cruelties and humiliations on their enemies, a group of adolescent girls. The girls were housed in wooden bunks, three to a bunk not big enough for one, and if someone in a upper bunk was sick, the people below her slept in her excrement. They received enough food for them to slowly starve to death.

My mother worked for a long time as a slave laborer in a flax factory, making materials for rope and fabric to be used by the German army. For a time, she even received some letters and packages from her family, but these stopped in August, 1943.

As the war started going against the Germans, they brought their Jews deeper into Germany. My mother was transported to Bergen-Belsen. This camp was not an extermination camp in the sense that there was no gas chamber, but it was a notoriously brutal camp with few survivors. My mother was very pretty, now 15 years old, and her hair had not, for some reason, been cut. Since she looked better than most, she was assigned to clean the latrines and quarters of the SS guards. They did not molest her, and when she talked back to them, as she naively did, they just laughed and were amused. They called her "The Little Gypsy" and treated her as their pet. She was able to steal food and bring it to her friends.

As the SS ran from the camps, when the Allies approached, they poisoned the water and many people contracted typhoid and died. My mother was one of the people very sick with typhoid, but she was recognized by a girl from Sosnowiec who was friends with her sister Toby, and Sabina, Toby's friend, carried her to a hospital inside the camp. The doctor in charge, Hadassah Bimko, a dentist before the war, recognized my mother and said, "Are you Miriam Cuckier's daughter?" Dr. Bimko was from Sosnowiec and she had known my mother's family. Dr. Bimko took special care of my mother, giving her medicine and juices to drink, since the water was contaminated, and did not allow her to die.

My mother was kept going by the belief that when the war was over, she would be reunited with her family. She learned after the war that her family was gassed at Auschwitz in August, 1943, in the last big transport to that camp from Poland. She was the sole survivor of her family, no siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins. Thus, by being

separated from her family
when my mother was chosen to stay and Toby to be released, my mother lived, as the sole survivor of a large extended family, and did not die in Auschwitz with the rest of her family.

My mother was liberated by the British Army on April 15, 1945, the first day of Passover.

My father's war began on September 8, 1939, when the German army crossed the Vistula River and occupied his home town of Radom, Poland. He was 14, in 10th grade, and the youngest of five children. His father was Jacob, mother Golda Warshenbrot Finkelstein, and he had three older brothers and an older sister. Their names were Avrum, Aaron, Hannnah, and Yosef. His family was middle class, very Zionist, and his two oldest brothers were university students, something rare for Jews in Poland in the 1930's.

My father was grabbed off the street immediately, and made to push trucks for the German army. A few days after the occupation, the Germans ordered that all Jews wear the yellow arm band, "Jude." The decree was issued, deliberately, on Yom Kippur.

My grandfather and the two oldest sons fled to the east, to Lvov, thinking this would be a safe haven for the few weeks it would take the Allies to push back the Germans. Jacob returned to his family, but the two oldest brothers stayed east, working as Hebrew teachers. When Germany invaded Russia in 1941, the Germans entered this town, and a mob of Ukranian anti-Semites, who welcomed the German army with joy, beat my uncles to death with clubs and shovels.

The family was shoved into a Ghetto, and from there to work camps. My father got separated from them and was working in a camp where he was falsely accused of stealing gasoline. He was ordered to be executed by shooting. He got word of this to his mother, and his sister Hannah, then 19, went to the head of her camp, a Major who despised the Nazis, and told him he had to save her brother. When he said he could do nothing, my aunt said, "You have a car, my brother is a mechanic." So a lieutenant was dispatched to bring my father back as the special mechanic for the Major. My father knew absolutely nothing about cars or machines. As he was leaving the camp, the Nazis shot another Jew, since someone had to die as an example.

Later, my father was sent to Auschwitz, and was assigned to a satellite camp as a slave laborer making anti-aircraft guns. There was a Polish woman who befriended my father, and he traded linens which he had stolen for bread. The linens belonged to the SS commander of the camp, and when it was discovered what happened my father, now 18, was brought to the commandant's office. Asked if he had stolen the linens, my father said it wasn't theft because he was hungry and needed food, a modern-day Jean Valjean. The commandant said, "Jew, you have a choice, you can be shot or you can be hanged." My father answered, "If I have a choice, I choose to live."

Just then the phone rang and the commandant took the call. My father said the Nazi turned pale and was visibly shaken. The commandant then sent my father back to

barracks, and ordered a lockup of all inmates. Whenever an execution was to take place, this was the procedure, all inmates were locked up, and then made to stand in formation to watch the execution. My father told his brother and father, who were with him, that this lock up was for him, and he said goodbye to them. They waited and nothing happened. Finally, after a long time, the inmates were ordered to march out of camp. The Russian army had broken through on the eastern front and was approaching Auschwitz. The phone call to the Nazi was the order to evacuate. In the confusion, my father's execution was overlooked.

My father was then part of group on a death march. He hasn't talked about it, only to say that 2000 men started out and 400 were left. He was sent to a brutal camp where he worked 12 hour shifts in a slave camp building V-2 missiles, nine stories below ground in chalk mines. Many died from the treatment at this camp.

Eventually my father, grandfather, and uncle were sent to Matthausen, a camp in Austria from which almost no Jews survived. When he and his brother and father arrived at Matthausen, he and his brother Joe were offered a "good job" which would entitle them to more food. It was to work the crematorium. My father refused because he wouldn't take any job that separated him from his father. My father was beaten and clubbed by a guard who yelled, "Stupid Dirty Jew" as he fractured my father's skull. The job was given to another set of brothers named Myer.

As punishment, they were ordered to a grave detail, where they buried Russian prisoners of war in a mass grave, one layer arranged head toe, toe head, then covered with lime, and another layer of bodies.

My father and uncle noticed that political prisoners had red triangles and wore hats. They stole some red material and hats, and became "prominents" who could walk freely around camp. They worked cleaning the latrines for Spanish Civil War prisoners, and hid their father and brought him food. Since they weren't recognized as Jews anymore, their ability to survive increased dramatically.

As the American army approached, however, a Czech who knew my father tipped him off that the SS was looking for the Finkelstein brothers to shoot them, as they were killing off the witnesses to war crimes. The Myer brothers who worked the crematorium had already been shot. My father needed a place to hide, so he took his brother Joe, who was too sick to walk, and carried him to the grave, where they hid themselves under the dead bodies. They lay there for half an hour, until they heard Patton's 101st army enter the camp. It was May 5, 1945.

The liberation was not a happy one, however. My uncle and my father had gotten separated from their father, and left alone he died a few days after liberation from starvation.

I would like to conclude by reading you my father's words when he first spoke publically about his life at the Israel Bonds dinner. This is what he said:

"I would like to recall the words of the prophet Yesheskial, Ezekiael. In his prophecy thousands of years ago, you can read it in Chapter 37, he said that God told the prophet to go to the valley full of bones, and God promised to open up their graves, and put flesh on the bones, and put breath in them, and lift them up to a new life. That's what God did to me. When I was liberated I was 19 years old and weighed 60 pounds. If you remember the pictures from the Nuremberg trials, that's how I looked, nothing but a skeleton. I escaped at the end by hiding in a grave with my brother, under the corpses. God fulfilled the prophesy–he lifted me out of the grave, put flesh on my bones and gave me a new life and spirit. He allowed me to live again, to continue to rebuild Jewish life. For that, I am grateful to God."